Developing Academic Literacies: Approaches to the Introductory EFL Research Seminar

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Over the past few years, major revisions have been made to the seminar system in the Department of British and American Cultural Studies (BACS). Academic year 2010 saw the introduction of a new first-year seminar, Introduction to English Language Studies and Academic Research (英米文化入門演習 I-II), whose main aims are to provide first-year students with an orientation to the English-medium classroom and a range of language study skills, and to introduce research and writing methods in Japanese. Also in 2010, the second-year seminar (英米文化演習 I-II), which focuses exclusively on developing students' academic interests, knowledge, and skills, was reorganized to provide more extensive instruction in both languages. The revised second-year seminar requires all students to complete one semester of research studies in both Japanese and English. While the semester of research in Japanese builds on the introduction to research undertaken in the first-year, the second-year English seminar marks the students' introduction to the research and writing process in their second language. As such, it presents a number of challenges for students as well as teachers.

Since its inception, the second-year English seminar has been a laboratory for approaches to inducting EFL students into the world of academic research. The teaching notes that follow report on two promising strategies in the EFL research classroom: Alun Davies focuses on the use of communicative approaches in the research process while Madeline Boulanger outlines the use of graded in-class writing activities that require outlines and research notes. The present essay provides some context for their contributions, outlining the aims, procedures, and skills focus of the second-year seminar, and includes discussion of some ongoing issues to be addressed in future curriculum revisions. The present essay also briefly outlines a framework for approaches to EFL research and future curriculum considerations, drawing on work in the area of academic literacies (Johns 1997).

Seminar Objectives

During their second year of studies, students in BACS register for a semester-long research seminar in English and in Japanese to be taken either in the spring or the fall semesters. The English seminar stream, like the Japanese one, has typically consisted of three or four classes organized around teachers' areas of research interest. Currently, the course content includes such themes as popular music and British society, Canadian cultural studies, and studies in sports history and culture. A new seminar in Irish cultural studies is proposed for academic year 2013. The aims of the course are to provide knowledge of a particular content area through literary, historical, or cultural studies approaches; to induct students into the research process using English materials almost exclusively; and to provide instruction and guidance in the completion of a short academic research essay. The repertoire of class activities includes most, if not all, of the following: a library orientation focused on the use of online databases, short lectures on course content, discussion of lecture and reading questions, short research presentations, group research meetings, peer review of drafts and student-teacher consultations.

Over the three-years that the new English seminar has been conducted, a number of common problems have been identified by instructors. Firstly, balancing instruction in research and writing skills and the transfer of content presents a major challenge, with content matters frequently pushed off the syllabus by the need to monitor students' research progress, conduct workshops on specific research and writing tasks, and consult on drafts. One solution to this dilemma is addressed by Davies below, in which students take over a greater share of the content through research discussions and presentations. Another solution is to confine content instruction to the first few weeks of the course, providing very general lecture overviews of content areas. Within this approach teachers would attempt to identify possible topics that students might take up. Instructors might also choose to include readings from reference sources such as encyclopedias and introductory works and encourage students to identify possible topics from these sources. These activities have the advantage of prompting discussion of the general nature of tertiary sources in addition to the need for students to commit to specific, serious, and manageable research topics. At least one short lecture, reading, or model essay on a specific topic of this sort might profitably be employed at this stage of the research process. Thus, the ways in which a student's individual research is situated within a broader field of knowledge can be illuminated, a recognition that could, among other things, bear fruit in assisting students in framing their topics in the introductory and concluding sections of their research essays.

Even when ample time is allotted to the research process and essay mechanics, it remains

a struggle to keep students attentive to issues of form and format, not to mention in step with the research schedule. Boulanger's use of a graded in-class writing assignment holds some promise in the "forcing the student' hand," as it were, when it comes to the usual delaying strategies that students often fall into during extended project work. The activity also forces students to pay attention to logic and support and such specific sentence-level tasks as identifying sources and using in-text (MLA) citations. The use of a series of graded assignments focused on specific steps in the research process and on issues of format and rhetorical organization may also provide the needed external motivator to keep students focused on form. Although the shape of the final product is a crucial part of assessment for both students and the instructor, breaking the course into discrete graded tasks can help shift the focus to process. Such tasks are also amenable to the communicative orientation outlined in Davies' contribution below, in which, for example, students might discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of each others' thesis statements. In any case, helping students to understand the necessity of planning along with attention to structure and format remains a significant challenge in the seminar course.

With the ongoing struggle of skills and content for priority in the seminar curriculum, it is easy for one theme of vital importance to get lost, namely, the rationale for the research seminar itself. Teachers may explain to students that course skills benefit them in their university studies and even perhaps that research skills are useful beyond the classroom. However, an important component of instruction could consist in helping students to see how the research seminar experience, even with its focus on specific academic literacies, can pay off in their professional lives after graduation. Because the concept of academic literacies may not be well known, the discussion below begins with a brief account of the field before addressing how the academic experience serves as induction into other forms of socioliteracy.

Johns (1997) defines the concept of literacy quite simply and inclusively as "ways of knowing particular content, languages, and practices." Yet it is complex and evolving in nature, referring to "strategies for understanding, discussing, organizing and producing texts" that includes "the social context in which a discourse is produced and the roles and communities of texts and readers" (2). It aims no less than to integrate "the many and varied social, historical, and cognitive influences on readers and writers as they attempt to process and produce texts" (2). A theory of literacy includes often unexamined assumptions about the learning process, including ideas about how knowledge is acquired, about the roles of students and teachers, and about the nature of texts themselves. A few examples will suffice. Within three broad approaches to literacy, which she identifies as Traditional, Learner-Centered, and Socioliterate, Johns points out that assumptions about the teacher's role in the classroom will vary considerably: the teacher may act as "role model," "source of know-

ledge," and "director of knowledge" (Traditional); as "facilitator" of classroom exploration and production (Learner-Centered); or as "intermediary . . . between learners and the worlds of language and literacy" (Socioliterate) (4-5). With regard to texts, Johns points out that for some literacy practitioners, it is the "formal properties of texts, their macrostructure and grammar" that represent the core of pedagogy (Traditional); for others, "the students' meaning-making processes" occupy the center of the learning process (Learner-Centered), while for others still it is "the community and culture in which texts are read and written and the social influences of the context on discourses" (5) that are of vital importance (Socioliterate). Johns observes further that we as teachers may make assumptions about teaching and learning or approach particular activities in one or all of these pedagogical modes; however, one theoretical orientation will invariably dominate our practice (5).

The present essay advocates a reflexive and pluralistic approach to pedagogy. The claim here will be twofold: (1) that each of the approaches outlined above possesses intrinsic merits that we may want to draw on in the classroom; (2) that we as teachers find ourselves in various social, institutional, and cultural contexts that require adaptation to, if not adoption of these approaches in large measure. Our roles and approaches may also be shaped in significant ways by the particular classroom activities that we engage in. A full discussion of this dynamic is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a few examples may serve to illustrate. Language teaching professionals working in discipline-specific contexts such as literature or economics departments will undoubtedly need to acquire a measure of literacy in specific areas of academic study, including, for example, an understanding of the features of the main academic genres, both spoken and written. Language teachers then become responsible for developing activities and materials that address these specific needs. Teachers of literature or other content areas may find themselves in institutional contexts where more traditional approaches and teaching roles are assumed, even expected by both colleagues and students. Neither the teacher as expert, most prominently on display in the lecture format, nor the instructor as facilitator in the learner-centered classroom are roles that we should need or even want to play at all times. Similarly, we do a disservice to our students if our theoretical assumptions lead to neglect of our roles as language and content experts, not only in matters of form but also in matters of guiding students in appropriate response to purpose and occasion. In other words, we are responsible for inducting into social worlds as well as skills and knowledge.

Academic Literacies and Socioliteracies

There are compelling reasons to argue that the research skills students practice in academic classes, especially when they require students to collect, evaluate, synthesize, and present

information using modern media and technologies, are of great practical value. IT literacy --information and technological literacy--is a basic entry requirement in our globally networked societies. However, as scholars in the field of literacy studies point out, research, writing, and the range of academic skills that students develop at university should be considered a valuable experience of socioliteracy. That is, an initiation into the culture of a particular community of practice. Thus, an apprenticeship to professional life, as it were, can begin in academic programs, guiding students in strategies that can increase their skills in negotiating different work and learning contexts in the future. As Christie argues, the conceptualization of learners in the socioliterate perspective is that of "social beings, achieving a sense of identity through learning to enter with increasing confidence into the ways of working" (Christie 1993, 100).

The EFL Research Class: Issues for Further Reflection

Currently in the second-year seminar an important component of the course is a research notebook, which serves as a means by which students can manage their research projects. It also provides a record for assessment by the instructor. The notebook may include students' class notes, certainly their research notes (paraphrases, summaries and quotations from sources with reference information), lists of keywords related to Internet and database searches, and perhaps a schedule of course deadlines and self-imposed objectives. Yet the notebook may also be a place to help students develop a measure of competency in academic and discipline-specific vocabulary and style, surely an important requisite in any program that aims to develop fundamental content- and skills-based literacy. According to Macken-Horarik (2002), the teaching of academic literacies involves a double focus: "toward the specificities of learning in particular subject areas, and toward the commonalities of higher order academic learning more generally" (19). The notebook then might be a means by which students collect useful collocations, specialized terms, and other lexical items from their reading. This would include words and expressions of a general academic, nature for example, the more formal register of words suited to written work, items for specific analytical tasks—discussing a poem or a painting or a film—and topic-specific collocations.

Two other issues for future reflection, which can only be mentioned briefly here, are (1) a clear understanding of genre features for specific tasks and (2) means of assessing student literacy in assigned tasks, in particular their assimilation of basic concepts and criteria relating to both research and academic writing. A beginning to the first need could be achieved by distributing models of written work and discussing the key features of the genre, first among instructors of the course and second with students themselves. Although there is no doubt sufficient agreement among teachers about the main components of the short re-

search essay genre, particular components specific to the fields of study (music, for example) and to the topics at hand (biographical profile) might be discussed in greater detail, with a view to providing guidance on negotiating some of the key "moves" entailed in the task.

In regard to assessing student literacy, peer review and student-teacher consultations are possible approaches. The use of peer review forms, whereby students read through classmates' written work and identify key structural elements and assess logic, support, and use of reference format, is a useful way of having students focus attention on these elements. Teacher-student consultations can likewise require students to prepare to speak on aspects of their work which the instructor, in his or her written evaluation, has marked for revision. Students would be asked to prioritize by selecting one or two revision points and prepare to discuss these with the instructor during an interview.

Davies' and Boulanger's notes on classroom strategies represent promising additions to the EFL research repertoire for the current second-year seminar — strategies that could be adapted to third- and fourth-year research seminars, in which longer and more detailed research projects and formal academic presentations are central. A future paper will address some proposals for revision and reconceptualization of the third- and fourth-year seminar curriculum.

References

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